

EQUITY IN EDUCATION

SEATTLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS AIMS TO GIVE EVERY STUDENT THE BEST COLLEGE- AND CAREER-PLANNING RESOURCES AVAILABLE; CONNECTEDU IS HELPING THEM GET THERE.

For Janet Blanford, Director of College and Career Readiness for Seattle Public Schools, her mission is personal: “Trying to determine my own path after high school was very random and uninformed—and I don’t want any one of our students to have that type of experience,” she says.

Blanford was the first member of her family to attend college, and while she is proud about that accomplishment, she wishes she’d been better prepared to make a sound decision. “I was almost completely reliant on the brochures that were mailed to my home,” she says. “I wasn’t actively doing any research—it was just whatever information came to me. So my decision-making process, in retrospect, was passive, and I did not initially enroll in a college that was right for me.”

Fortunately, a decision to transfer colleges after her freshman year put Blanford on a path as an educator, beginning as a high school science teacher and moving into other roles such as curriculum development over the course of 22 years.

Three years ago, when she began her role as Director of College and Career Readiness at Seattle Public Schools, Blanford found that the counseling situation in all but a “handful” of the district’s high schools was too reminiscent of her own experience. “Access to a reliable online information tool (for course-tracking and college-planning) was spotty—it was fully dependent on whether a particular school had the resources, and most didn’t have the steady funding stream,” she says. “At the district leadership level, we really wanted to make sure that all our students have accurate, up-to-date information



about post-high-school opportunities, and a way to track their progress toward their goals. And to engage them and their families in that process, we saw that we needed a robust district-wide platform.”

Blanford and her team put out a request for proposal for a technology partner who could meet the full scope of all the district’s needs—and one respondent stood out “far and above the others,” she says. “There are some other companies that can do a piece of the college- and career-planning process well, but we found that ConnectEDU ties everything together with depth and breadth that nobody else does.”

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Active and Informed

In the less than two years since the platform launched, half of the district’s nearly 16,000 high-school students—as well as every eighth grader—have activated their profiles. Getting them into the system—and the opportunities to track

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grades, learn about career opportunities, college options, and explore financial aid possibilities—is an important first step. In an ongoing process, validated student data, such as transcripts, are being integrated into ConnectEDU’s secure database, where it will be at each student’s fingertips. In the past, that information was only available via “a gatekeeper,” Blanford says.

“Students had to go to their counselor or the registrar and wait—and they had to know that was the way to get it in the first place,” she says. “Providing them a way to have that information whenever they want it, so they can take ownership and be empowered to track their own progress—

that alone gets us much farther down the road.”

To boost utilization, Blanford has focused on “getting counselors up to speed” and getting students involved. One message: here is a resource that offers much more than simply meeting the state of Washington’s graduation requirement that each student have a very basic five-year “High School and Beyond Plan.”

As Blanford puts it, ConnectEDU “scaffolds” the post-secondary and career-planning process, offering a way to discover a stimulating career and then connect that to post-high-school options.

ConnectEDU has been not just a vendor but a partner throughout the process of tailoring its platform for Seattle’s needs. “Whenever you deal with technology and change, some people are intimidated, but ConnectEDU has been so patient and ready to do whatever they can to ease our staff through this transition into the system,” Blanford says. “They are just super-responsive.”

This is also true, she adds, when it comes to connecting local educational and employer partners, such as Seattle Community College (with more post-secondary schools to come) and the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County. “The team at ConnectEDU

has been working consistently with us and our partners to ensure that the platform is relevant regionally here in the Puget Sound as well as nationally.”

Engaging Students and Families

Beyond boosting student utilization, Blanford is excited about the new opportunity to engage families—an essential element of success. She held her first session with a small group of parents last spring and looks forward to sharing the “great potential” of the platform on a larger scale in the 2013-14 school year.

Particularly at a time when the mission of high schools is changing—the goal is no longer graduation but preparation for a series of next steps, “the stakes are higher in post-secondary decision-making than they’ve ever been before,” Blanford says.

“Equity matters. We need to make sure that all students and families today have access to accurate and meaningful information. I’m excited, through ConnectEDU, to be able to give our Seattle Public Schools students and families a way take more control over their own futures.”

EMPOWERING STUDENTS

- Seattle Public Schools is the largest K-12 school system in Washington State, serving almost 50,000 students in 95 schools (including 12 high schools).
- With a diversity of populations and resources across the district, access to online course-tracking and post-secondary-planning information varied widely from school to school.
- With ConnectEDU’s platform now in place, every student at every school is empowered to make highly informed college and career decisions.
- ConnectEDU gives Seattle Public Schools a comprehensive tool for engaging students’ families with college and career opportunities locally and nationally.